

## RHODA'S SECRET

Continued From Last Issue

"Of course, you have not seen her for years. You are like him, George. We were very much alike, and I. He would not know me." "You saw my mother once?" said Rhoda. "I went to see them at Lucerne. I was before you were born. My mother was not a lady, Rhoda, we were all very angry with her for marrying her. That was the first offense. My father was a man, he struck Arthur's name from his will. I went secretly to see to see your father; but we failed. He had a very bitter spirit; and he did not spare me. I saw your mother—a sweet fair girl; I can see her now." "You never saw her again?" "Never. We lost sight of them for ever. I had my own troubles to live with. I have had great troubles. I was to have married Lord Arncliffe's eldest son; but he died. I had other troubles after that. Now I am desolate and only live with for my money. You are very rich, don't you?" "Molly told me so." "Mrs. Dering thinks that I shall give it all to Molly. Perhaps I will." She gave Rhoda an odd look and settled her draperies over her with trembling fingers. "I look very haggard and old," she said, with a piteous look. "I am, Rhoda." "Aunt Millicent, you do look haggard. You look older than I do, because you dress so thoughtfully." "Rhoda had meant to speak very gently—to please; to flatter; but words came despite herself. Mrs. Dering went to the glass and looked at herself. Then she turned to Rhoda.

"How would you like me to dress?" she said sharply. "You ought to wear a pretty cap and a different dress, and let more light into your room. You would look beautiful still, Aunt Millicent—just as you did when you were young, only with a different beauty." "Mrs. Dering dropped the curtain at once again. "You are a very extraordinary woman, Rhoda," she said. "You do not like my room or my dress. You would like me to dress as your nuns dressed, I suppose?" "You would not like that," replied Rhoda, with a faint smile. "They have dressed you very nicely. Rhoda, what would I give you for your youth and your quiet—undisturbed past?"

Rhoda did not answer, and Miss Dering went on in a lighter tone. "The nuns have taught you how to speak. You will have to do so at the latter lesson, Rhoda." "You asked my opinion," said Rhoda gently. "Oh, I like your frankness! I was like that; you are what I was. If you had been like your mother, Mrs. Dering would have been better, but you would not have been the same to me." "You ought to be angry with me for my rudeness," said Rhoda. "No, I am not angry. I know I am an old woman. Don't shake your head and spoil your beautiful hair. I shall tell Mrs. Dering what you have said to me." She leaned still looking fixedly at Rhoda. "You must come to see me every day," she said, "and say to me exactly what you think. Perhaps you will get me to wear caps and leave my powder. Now call Stanton and go. Tell Mrs. Dering I shall come down to luncheon."

A few days passed, and the intense longing to tell the truth which Rhoda had at first felt gradually wore off. Her relatives so completely took her part for granted, she showed so much curiosity about it that it was no longer a secret. Molly was too full of her own experiences to care much to listen to Rhoda's stories of the quiet convent days. The two girls spent their happy mornings in Molly's room. When work was over, Molly was the chief talker. Rhoda talked all about the escapades with the boys that had made Molly's childhood such an exciting time.

Rhoda's afternoons were devoted to Mrs. Dering. This occasioned a struggle between Mrs. Dering and her sister-in-law, Rhoda was not at all at the stormy interview between them; but though Mrs. Dering was away, she was bitterly cold to Rhoda after that.

When Rhoda had never come to see her, she said angrily to her husband, "She is taking Molly's place in my heart."

"Well, Molly will have to go, and to spare," George Dering replied soothingly.

"I wish the girl looked happier, Agnes; she never smiles. Have you noticed that? She looks as if she had some great burden to bear."

"What can a girl want more?" said Mrs. Dering, with a touch of bitterness in her tone. "Molly is devoted to her. It is ridiculous for her to have such tragedy about her. I have no patience with her!"

It was a day or two after this that Miss Dering one morning announced her intention of going to London for a week. She wished, she said, to consult a new doctor. Rhoda was to go with her, and Rhoda only. There was another sharp struggle with Mrs. Dering, who at first declared that Rhoda should not go; but she gave way after a time, and one bright frosty morning Rhoda and her aunt proceeded by train to Waterloo. They drove to the Langham, where Miss Dering had engaged rooms.

"I will go and see the doctor tomorrow," said Miss Dering, who looked wonderfully bright and well. "Now we will have lunch, and then I want to pay a call."

She left Rhoda in the sitting-room and went to her own room. Rhoda walked to the window and stood looking absently into the street.

After a while she heard the door open behind her and turned to speak to her aunt. She started violently, for the lady who entered was very unlike the Millicent Dering whom she had learned to know. All the false complexion was gone; her hair was plainly fastened up under a pretty cap; her dress was of sober make and fashion.

"You hardly knew me, Rhoda," said Miss Dering with a smile. "See I have followed your advice!" She walked up to the girl and patted her on the cheek. "I do not know what you have done to me, Rhoda. You have made me want to be good."

Rhoda burst into passionate tears. Miss Dering put her arms round her. "I must have frightened you, and I wanted to please you! Come, Rhoda, let us have our luncheon and then go out; I am anxious to see how people will look at me. How do you think I look?"

But Rhoda's tears would not stop. She sank down upon the chair beside her aunt and hid her face. There was a wild longing in her heart to tell her aunt all, but the words would not come, and the good moment passed. She grew calmer after a time and was able to talk lightly about Miss Dering's new mode of dressing. She was pale and tremulous however when they went out and drove down Regent Street and towards the Park. Miss Dering looked critically at Rhoda as they drove on.

"I like your dress, my dear," she said, "and being pale suits you. We are going to steal a march on Mrs. Dering, Rhoda."

Rhoda looked for an explanation. "We are going to call upon 'our heir,'" said Miss Dering, with an exact imitation of Mrs. Dering's impressive tone. "You have not seen Adrian Dering yet; I want to introduce him to you."

The carriage stopped at a house in Brook Street. Mr. Dering was at home, and the two ladies were taken upstairs into a large front room, the walls of which were lined with books. A tall, handsome, dark-eyed man came to meet them.

"Aunt Millicent, this is a great and unexpected pleasure." He looked at her in some amazement and she said with a nervous laugh—"You scarcely knew me in this new style of dress; this is Rhoda's work. Let me introduce you to Rhoda."

Adrian held out his hand with a grave smile.

"Let us shake hands, Cousin Rhoda, as cousins should." He took her hand in a firm and friendly clasp. "I should have made your acquaintance at Dering next week," he said; "I have been so busy that I have not been able to run down lately."

Adrian Dering was a remarkably handsome man. He was a true Dering, tall and dark and slenderly built. He reminded Rhoda a little of her father; but there was a look of intellectual power on Adrian's face that was wanting in Mr. Dering's. Yet it was a cold face; there was no tenderness or softness in its lines, no gentleness in the brilliant dark eyes. He was very cordial however to the two ladies, got tea for them, and accepted with evident pleasure Miss Dering's invitation to dinner that evening.

"This is for your black silk dress, Rhoda, it is too plain for you. Put this lace on and wear some flowers to-night. I don't want Adrian to think us dingy and old-fashioned."

Rhoda saw Adrian Dering nearly every day that week—often more than once a day. Once or twice Miss Dering sent them out together. One long walk they had in the early morning of the last day through Hyde Park into Kensington Gardens. Rhoda exclaimed at the beauty of the old trees in the Gardens.

"They remind me of the trees in our convent garden," she said involuntarily.

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Adrian looked at her with one of his rare smiles.

"There is a strange fascination for me in the thought of that convent life of yours," he said. "How shut off from the world it must have been! It is the right sort of education for a girl."

Rhoda looked straight before her without speaking.

"When I saw you first," Adrian went on, "it seemed to me as if the quiet spirit of the convent life was still resting on you; you were very pale, and your solemn gray eyes seemed to reproach the world for being so gay and flippant. I wondered then if you had ever laughed."

"You have heard me laugh since," said Rhoda, with a bitter little smile.

"Once or twice, and I have seen you smile as you are smiling now, as if you were unused to mirth. How different you are from little Molly!"

"Very different!" "Molly has always lived in the sunshine, and she does not know what seriousness is. You, Rhoda, have learned much from those grave, quiet convent years."

"You think you understand me after a week's friendship?" said Rhoda, trying to speak lightly.

"I do understand you; I look at your face and read your nature there—tender and strong and true. No wonder you have made Aunt Millicent a different being! I thank you for that, Rhoda; your influence over her is wonderful."

"You are unjust to Molly," she answered, "you do not appreciate her."

"We do not suit each other," said Adrian, briefly. He glanced at Rhoda, and then said, "Aunt Agnes may have told you of her wishes, Rhoda."

"She told me it was her wish that Molly should marry you."

"It will be a trial for her to know the truth," he answered. "Molly could never care for me. I once wished to marry Molly; I thought it would be right. But I do not wish that any longer, Rhoda."

Rhoda was about to answer, when a girl, who had been walking at a little distance, turned and approached them. Rhoda recognized her Paris servant Sarah.

"That girl seems to know you,"

said Adrian, glancing at her.

"I must speak to her," said Rhoda, hurriedly. She went quickly forward.

"How strange to meet you here, Sarah!" she said in a low tone.

To her surprise, the girl burst into tears. She caught hold of Rhoda's hand and held it.

"What is the matter?" said Rhoda faintly. "Terror that Adrian might overhear made her heart beat fast. He must know the truth one day, but not by a chance discovery like this."

"Miss Dering, I saw you by chance in the street yesterday, and I have been waiting about. I followed you to-day; I want to speak to you."

"What do you want to say?" said Rhoda.

"To tell you that I won't do it," whispered the girl.

"Do what?" "What the Frenchman wanted of me; I will send the money back to him. My sister is in good service, and she will help me. I will not have his money."

"Monsieur Lefroy gave you money? What did he give it to you for?"

"It was the night before I went away. I was to give him the address where I could always be found; and, when he wanted me, I was to tell things against you. But I wanted to write and tell you I wouldn't do it, only I did not know the address. And, when I saw you this morning, it seemed as if Heaven had sent me here to these gardens so that I might see you."

Rhoda drew a deep breath. "What were you to say against me?" she said.

"What he told me to say. He hates you, Miss Dering, and he hates your father; but I won't help him. Adrian drew nearer to them.

"Can I be of any service?" he said. "This young woman seems in great distress, Rhoda. Does she come from Dering?"

"No, from Paris," said Rhoda, briefly.

She wrote a few lines on a card with her pocket-pencil.

"That is my address," she said to the servant. "Write to me there if

you want help, I will get it for you."

"Let me see you again, Miss Dering!" pleaded Sarah, whose eyelids were red with weeping. "You were hard upon me, but you meant to be kind, and I'd never say a word to hurt you."

"Come and see me this evening at the Langham Hotel," said Rhoda. Her lips became very pale as she turned away with Adrian. He looked at her tenderly.

"How that girl's trouble has touched you, Rhoda! You are deathly pale. Who was she—one of the servants at the convent?"

"I will tell you all about her one day," Rhoda answered. "Do not speak about her for a moment, Adrian; she is in trouble, and I must think how to help her."

"Tell me and Aunt Millicent all about it. You do not know anything about the world, Rhoda, and you must let us help you. You poor little girl how pale you are!"

He drew her hand within his arm. "Aunt Millicent shall see her to-night," said Rhoda, faintly.

"But you are going home this evening; you forgot that, Rhoda."

"Yes, I forgot that; but she will write."

Rhoda was still very pale when they reached the hotel; and Miss Dering sent her off to lie down. Adrian was to stay to luncheon, and he sat down opposite to Miss Dering and began to play absently with the books on the table. Miss Dering watched his face for some minutes, then she said:—

"Do you know that I am going to leave all my money to Rhoda?"

Adrian looked up with a great start.

"To Rhoda! Aunt Millicent, you have known her but a few weeks, and you have settled that already!"

"The will was made, signed, and sealed the day after I came to London," said Miss Dering coolly, "and I am not going to change my mind again. Rhoda is like my own child—like my own old self. She will have all my money, and she won't have long to wait."

(To Be Continued.)